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ABSTRACT

Career literature is limited in its theoretical and practical understanding about the role that spirituality plays in career development and career choices. African Methodist Episcopal Church women were surveyed about their spirituality and its role in their career choices in a pilot naturalistic study. The purpose of the study was to discover how the women defined spirituality and how they later used it to effect career decisions. Results show that four beliefs were found among the participants: spirituality influences career decisions; spirituality influences interactions with others; spirituality increases awareness of self; and prayer is a useful tool when making career decisions. Implications of these findings for career development research are identified, including how best to integrate prayer into the career planning and decision making process. Career development specialists must borrow insights from multiculturalism and learn to accept more than one relational view of career choice. Career development specialists and researchers who are not trained sufficiently about the convergence of spirituality and career development run the risk of ignoring a significant support system for their clients. Graduate training programs are encouraged to ensure that this multicultural element of spirituality is valued, respected, and nurtured so that future career professionals are prepared to address spirituality responsibly and ethically. (MKA)

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RUNNING HEAD: Career Development and Spirituality

Career Development and Spirituality in AME Church Women

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D. WRIGHT

Career Development and Spirituality in AME Church Women

The career literature is limited in its theoretical and practical understanding about the role that spirituality plays in career development and career choices. Using a qualitative design, nine African Methodist Episcopal Church women were surveyed about their spirituality and its role in their career choices in a pilot naturalistic study. The purpose of this study was to discover how women defined spirituality and how they later used it to effect career decisions. Comparative analysis of the survey data confirmed that these church women see a relationship between their personal spirituality and their career choice that is relational in focus. Prayer was revealed to be a critical tool in making career decisions for these participants. Implications of these findings for career develop research and practice are identified.

Career Development and Spirituality in AME Church Women

As the new millennium approaches, career development scientists, practitioners, and employers all wonder just what new careers and new career needs will arise. What new career development tasks will researchers discover? What new professions will emerge that we cannot imagine today? Noted career development researcher Sunny Hansen noted several global and national trends affecting career development practice and research in the future (1993). Among those trends are: (1) technological revolution; (2) environmental degradation (e.g. deforestation); (3) human rights; (4) world population issues; (5) migration (influx of refugees, immigrants across cultures); (6) new ways of knowing and researching (new research paradigms); (7) violence; (8) changing gender roles; (9) spirit and meaning (people seeking spirituality); and (10) multiculturalism (valuing and celebrating diversity) (p. 9). All of these trends are equally viable and present challenges for professionals. Perhaps none is as formidable as the issue of spirituality. How individuals use spirituality within their career decision making is a topic of growing interest in the field of career development. Yet, to date the research and available literature on this career specialty are limited. A few scholars and practitioners are beginning to examine its role in career development. Deborah Bloch and Lee Richmond discuss the connection between spirituality and work in an edited book entitled *Connections between spirit and work in career development. New approaches and practical perspectives* (1997). In this text, they and their chapter contributors imply that future workplace environments must include spirituality. They offer specific recommendations to individuals and organization that would promote the inclusion of spirituality in corporate decisions, theory development, and career assessment. Susan Imel, in a similar vein, discusses spirituality within the workplace and notes future trends (1998). She outlines key issues and dilemmas related to spirituality within a

career assessment. Susan Imel, in a similar vein, discusses spirituality within the workplace and notes future trends (1998). She outlines key issues and dilemmas related to spirituality within a work context. Imel acknowledges the inherent value conflicts that spirituality creates when it interacts with "profit motive" values. She concludes her discussion by reminding career development professionals that they must prepare for a workforce and a workplace environment that will embrace a spiritual dimension. A relational approach to careers and spirituality is recommended. Even business management authors Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal consider the issues of soul and spirit with corporate workplace settings (1995). These authors are the few who are discussing spirituality, an issue of increasing interest to employers and workers alike. Career counselors and career development educators are now challenged to examine spirituality in research, theory development and in practical applications.

Paul Petersen (1991) in his seminal discussion of multiculturalism, makes a note that religion is one aspect of the emerging field of multicultural counseling that is of growing interest to practitioners and researchers alike. When viewed as a component of diversity, spirituality and religious aspects of development within counseling practice are not fully understood. Yet, as future clients and consumers proclaim their spirituality, they will require work environments that are congruent with their spiritual values and beliefs. Career development specialists will be pressed to assist these consumers to integrate spirituality into their career development planning. Examining how spirituality is considered within the context of career development is a timely topic worthy of debate, discussion, and inquiry.

The present study concerns the issue of spirituality and career development among a select group of African American Women, those who are members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), the oldest African American denomination in the US. This study is

important because it sheds light on a little known and less well understood phenomenon of spirituality and career development. Moreover, this study examines a secular activity, career choice that has been completely overlooked as a place for ministry and service by most churches. This discussion begins by examining the spiritual and practical tenets of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME).

The African Methodist Episcopal Church is a Protestant denomination that was founded by African American Philadelphia resident Richard Allen when he protested the segregated worship taking place at St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in 1787. Over the next few years, segregated worship continued to be protested. In April 1816 African American church attendees called a General Conference to form a Connection. A resolution was passed which authorized the creation of the African Methodist Church (AME Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church 1997). Today, the AME Church is the largest African American denomination in the US with over 3 million members worldwide (Phillips, 1992, p. 25.).

"The mission of the African Methodist Episcopal Church is to minister to the spiritual, intellectual, physical, and emotional, and environmental needs of all people by spreading Christ's liberating gospel through word and deed" (African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1997, p.12). The Church's mission goes on to declare that ". . . at every level of the Connection and in every local church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church shall engage in carrying out . . . (1) preaching the gospel, (2) feeding the hungry, (3) clothing the naked, (4) housing the homeless, (5) cheering the fallen, (6) providing jobs for the jobless, (7) administering to the needs of those in prisons, hospitals, nursing homes, asylums and mental institutions, senior citizens' homes;

caring for the sick, the shut-in, the mentally and socially disturbed, and (8) encouraging thrift and economic advancement" (p. 12).

The AME Church is concerned with uplifting African American people - individuals, families, and communities. The AME Church's mission statement sets a stage for training its membership for specialized Christian service jobs and tasks. If carried out, their objectives would be consistent with Hansen's assessment of future global career trends, especially in the areas of multiculturalism, spirituality, violence, and human right concerns.

The AME Church believes there is but one living and true God of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness. He is the Maker and Preserver of all things, both visible and invisible. In unity of this God-head, AME believe there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost (African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1997). This triumvirate encourages AMEs to seek such unity within their daily live existence. As such, the career choices a church member might make should be reflective of this triune.

The operating assumption for the present study is that AME church women utilize their spirituality and their church to help them make career choice decisions. The purpose of this investigation is to discover the connection or relationship between spirituality and one's career development pathways. The data reported here is one part of a larger study of African American church women that is not included in the present study.

Methodology

Participants

The participants for this pilot study included nine African American women who were members of various African Methodist Episcopal churches in suburban and rural Georgia communities. They ranged in age from 36 to 70 years of age. Six were either divorced or never

married while three were married. Two women were graduates of professional or graduate schools, three were college graduates and four had some college education. Participants were employed in a variety of occupations ranging from a large corporation to government and health care settings; one owned a business. Two were either unemployed or not fully employed.

Participants were recruited from several informal sources: an Episcopal District Women's Missionary meeting; church choir rehearsal, Bible study group meetings, and preceding or following Sunday church services. Only those participants who identified themselves as "AME" were included in this inquiry. Survey participants from other church denominations or groups were excluded from this data coding.

Research Design

This study employed a naturalistic design. An open ended questionnaire format was employed for two reasons. First, respondents were recruited from across the entire state of Georgia. The investigator was unable to arrange meeting times to fit the schedules of the investigator, churches and participants. Second, in the midst of data gathering, the investigator moved out of the region, thereby making focus group interviews impractical. For these reasons, an open-ended questionnaire method of data collection was employed for this inquiry.

Procedure

Respondents were given a research packet containing the consent form, a white marked envelope, survey questionnaire with instructions, and a self-stamped mailing envelope. Each was asked first to sign the consent and enclosed it in the white envelope and seal it. Next, participants completed a 21-item survey questionnaire that included ten open-ended questions followed by eleven demographic items. Respondents wrote their comments directly on the questionnaire. When completed, respondents placed the completed questionnaire, along with the sealed

envelope containing the consent form, in the self-stamped mailing envelope. They were instructed either to return it to the investigator via mail or deposit it in a box located at the investigator's church. Participants wrote responses to the following prompt questions.

1. How would you define spirituality?
2. What role has your spirituality played in your own career choices?
3. How has your spirituality supported you in making your career choices?
4. How has your spirituality limited or restricted you in making your career choices?
5. If you did not have your spirituality and religious beliefs, how would your career choices have been different?
6. In your opinion, how might you use your spirituality to make career choices in the future?
7. How has your particular church affiliation influenced your career choices, if at all?
8. How has your particular denomination affiliation influenced your career choices?
9. Are there any Biblical scriptures or spiritual messages that are or have been valuable to you in making career choices? How have you used them? Please identify those scriptures or messages below.
10. What other comments would you like to share concerning your spirituality and career choices?

Data coding and analysis

The primary task of data coding analysis was to discover how AME church women experienced spirituality and to articulate its role in their personal career and life choices. Those elements that were revealed are grounded in the sense that they are derived from the participants' responses. When taken together, these elements or concepts can be related to each other and may be expressed as a concept model. This concept model may be viewed as representing an account of the way AME church women characterize their spirituality and how it functions in their lives as they effect career and personal live choices. These grounded concepts were identified by inspection of the participants' responses to the survey questions.

According to Glaser and Straus (1967), when using constant comparative method, chunks of data are identified and isolated from the raw data. These chunks or pieces of information are

then related to each other. For this study, each piece of information that was used to define a element of spirituality is referred to as belief or affirmation, a statement by a participant that she believes is true based upon [her] experience (Marguia, Padilla, & Pavel, 1991). This belief or affirmation is a basic unit of analysis. A critical first step in this analysis was to identify and put together relevant belief statements from the raw data. Such statements are best identified through the use of analytic questions created by the investigator. They can be derived either from evolving hypotheses, insights gathered from questionnaires, preliminary data analysis, and so for the (Marguia, Padilla, & Pavel, 1991, p. 435). Analytic questions may be used to help codify or segment the questionnaire data which, in turns, helps the investigator identify, select, and categorize assertions into meaningful phrases. The analytic questions used for this study are as follows. (1) How do AME church women daily experience spirituality?
(2) What is the role of spirituality as AME church women make career choices? These questions combine to create a structural framework for coding the participants'responses.

Participant responses were categorized first by question across all respondents. Following this analysis, the responses were analyzed together to identify key themes common across all items and participants. These common theme areas formed the basis from which two grounded concepts were derived from the analytical questions.

Results

Two grounded concepts were derived from the first analytic question. The first concept is that *"spirituality is a relationship with God."* Participants defined spirituality in several ways. Church women believe their spirituality is defined first within the context of one's personal relationship with God and is affirmed later through one's relationships with and service to others

(to biological and extended family, community, church family and so forth). This relationship was characterized further as reliance upon God.

Ten responses reflected the importance of a relationship or connection with God in defining their spirituality. Two categorized it as an unseen force, one you can feel. They acknowledged God's omnipotence as they discussed the relationship. "God's law, all power" and "All things are possible with Christ" characterize those feelings about God's omnipotence. Others described their relationship with God using such phrases as 'Holy Spirit, Jesus, and God" [the Trinity] and "faith, hope, and love". Table 1 provides examples of statements that illustrate this belief. Overall, a total of 38 responses confirmed this belief that spirituality is a relationship with God.

The second grounded concept is *"spirituality has a significant role in my life."* Three felt it was "very important" in [their] lives and five said that it influences or shapes actions in their lives. "Put God first" is one woman's interpretation of its significance. The voice of another participant best summarizes how these women feel about their spirituality. "I can't imagine life without spirituality."

The second analytic question asked what role does spirituality have in career decision making for these women? Four beliefs emerged from the data. (1) Spirituality influences career decisions. (2) Spirituality influences interactions with others. (3) Spirituality increases awareness of self; and (4) Prayer is a useful tool when making career decisions.

Influences career decisions

Respondents admitted that when considering career [and life] choices - past, present and future, spirituality is [or will be] an active ingredient of career decision making. One respondent disclosed that her spirituality helped her decide critical life events: to complete high

school, to marry, to choose motherhood. to continue [her] education, and to accept the call [to ministry]. For this devout Christian, all the major developmental and career life tasks were achieved with the God's assistance and guidance to direct her life pathways. Most of these women offered personal testimonials that supported this participant's sentiments. Each made life and career decisions only after first "consulting" with God for his guidance. Each saw her career path as directed by God, a plan that is not always revealed to her. The trust they place in God's wisdom and judgment gives them comfort and assurance to know God will provide them with a career path if they just continue to have faith and trust him. " The voice of one participant illustrates this belief. "Where he leads me, I will follow. . . Trusting that God will lead me in the direction that I can serve him best, then I must 'trust him'". "My spirituality is all my life". "My spirituality is the most important thing in my life. . . I can sustain life's ups and downs...It allows me to be at peace with myself, therefore allowing me to be there for others." Table 2 provides examples of other statements reflecting this belief.

Seven respondents indicated that spirituality influences specific career (or life) choices. Four indicated it played a "big" role in career choices. Three said they would have chosen a different company or professional work setting had it not been for their personal spirituality. One woman noted that she used her spirituality to measure workplace activities. "Since AMEs are known for organized service, I believe I chose companies that mirror organization. AMEs value education and I tend to target companies that value education as well".

Six women felt that their spirituality had limited their career choices, but that limitation was not viewed as a negative attribute. One respondent explained it this way, " [It] restricted me in the sense that whatever area I would have chosen would have to be something – upright, with decency and honesty and integrity." Perhaps the most poignant observation is found in this

participant's honest reflection. " [without spirituality] I am sure that I would have taken advantage of opportunities for advancement simply because they offered more money & 'perceived' power. . . (sort of like selling my soul to the devil for a few baubles) "

The way to reach an appropriate career, according to these participants, is by affirming and strengthening one's relationship with God. One respondent paraphrased scripture and described it in this way. " I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength. . . Faith is the substance of all things hoped for . . . Walk by Faith not by sight."

Interactions with others

The second belief identified is that *"spirituality influences interactions with others"*. Women noted how their spirituality aided them in their interactions with others. They speculated what would have happened without spirituality to influence their interactions. Two respondents commented that their professional interactions with patients/consumer/ persons whom they serve would have been less effective and those professional interactions would have had less meaning. "Probably without religion, it would limit my ability to have compassion and empathy for my patients that I see on a day to day basis. I probably would have chosen the same field, but [I] would not have been as effective with communication." Still others felt they would have experienced emotional and/or behavioral changes without spirituality. "I would be more critical of people". . . [I would be] more arrogant, unforgiving, and greedy. "I would have great difficulty deciding upon a course [of action]" remarked one woman. "[B]ecause of my beliefs I would not engage in career activities that would harm others (consciously)" commented another.

Participants declared that their interactions with others would have been a different and less enriching experience if it were not for their spirituality. Respondents were quick to

acknowledge the special role that spirituality played in their relationships with others. They simply could not imagine viable interactions without the presence of spirituality.

Increased self awareness

Participants described how their spirituality helped to increase their awareness of personal skills, talents, abilities, strengths and limitations. Spirituality also served to affirm their skills, abilities and talents especially when performed in service to others. "I am blessed" " Do my Best!" are examples of such affirming statements. Participants did not hesitate to express a variety of self statements including unpleasant ones. " I didn't get the job . . I wasted time . . . "I was looked down upon because of my [lack of] education." However, through such unhappy times and sadness, the participants' spirituality was a support. " Spirituality kept me focused." . . . "[it] kept me looking toward higher power" " [it] kept me from yielding to worldly influences".

Five participants noted that spirituality kept them focused, allowing them to " stay the course" and complete their plans . One woman admitted that her spirituality motivated her to study scripture, which she viewed as a positive outcome. Overall, participants acknowledged that their spirituality helped them to recognize and take ownership of their skills and talents while being supported to examine their shortcomings. These observations and reflections were viewed as positive actions overall, despite difficult job choices and job setbacks. Because these women felt so positive and upbeat about their own life experiences, it was difficult to determine which responses were made by the unemployed or underemployed participants which is a testimonial to the power of spirituality for these women.

Prayer as career tool

Participants wrote freely about their use of prayer whenever faced with a difficult or challenging career or life choice. [I do] much prayer before making any future choices. These

women have a strong conviction that God will lead them to the "right" career. Prayer is the mechanism through which the "right" career choice is revealed. Career choices are effected after praying to God for guidance and seeking his counsel and support. The following responses are typical of this belief system. By "trusting, leaning and depending " upon God, he will show you the path he wants you to take. [I am] "prayerful about career change. "I wouldn't step outside God's will and plan for my life. " I will continue to pray for guidance when making [career] choices."

Participants were quite precise as they identified those scriptures they used for support and guidance. There were seven scriptural references from the Book of Psalms. Six verses were selected from Phillipians. One scriptural passage was chosen from each of the Books of Isaiah and Ephesians. A complete listing of these scriptural references is reported in Table 3. In addition, participants wrote other supportive religious messages and provided personal examples. The common themes across all those scriptural messages and Bible passages can be categorized as confidence, affirmation [of faith], reliance [upon God], and helping others. One participant listed her scripture and noted that [it] "demonstrates the balance between my life in Christ and my life here on earth" . . . She goes on to say that . . . "All things are possible & achievable with God as my support system." These and other similar responses affirm the belief that God is the center of their lives and that through faith in God, career choices [and all other life tasks] are possible. Prayer for these women is an active tool they use when faced with career and life choices daily and across time.

Discussion

Career decisions are made with the direct guidance from God and with secondary endorsement from church members and others in their Christian fellowship for these AME

church women, This decision making strategy is neither atypical nor abnormal for women who are true Christian believers and followers. For AME Christians, the importance of forming and utilizing a Connection is an integral part of their church fellowship. These women know of no other career decision making strategy because they are life long Christians who have used spirituality as their career decision making strategy for decades.

What can these AME church women tell career development researchers and practitioners about the role of spirituality in career development? Two observations are important. First, for women who are true believers of Christ, the first career exploration task is that of prayer. This role has not been defined historically within the career counselor's scope of practice. How best to integrate prayer into the career planning and decision making process is challenging even for those counselors who themselves are believers. The second task is to guide believers into those career paths that have been shown to them through prayer, scripture, and all the other ways that God reveals himself to believers. Helping women to identify and to make sense of career interests *are* tasks within the career counselor's scope of practice. What is most important for career development counselors and specialists to remember is that for these Christian women, their career path is relational - self in relation to God. That relationship must be affirmed first before any other career decisions can be considered. This relational focus is perhaps at odds with traditional psychology views of object relations and self psychology. For this reason, career development specialists must borrow insights from multiculturalism and learn to accept more than one relational view of career choice. Career counselors must develop flexibility and accept multiple world views of spirituality, decision making and the world of work. The message here is a simple one. If career development professionals are committed to the inclusion of spirituality within their work, they must develop and utilize multicultural

counseling skills and competencies because spirituality is truly a multicultural experience. If professionals challenge the legitimacy of the career path laid out by God, clients may see that apprehension as a sign of disrespect and cultural insensitivity. An ethically responsible alternative would be for the career counselor to help the client identify important elements of God's chosen pathway. As an example, consider the respondent who said that her interactions with her patients would be less effective if she did not have her spirituality. A counselor might help this woman to explore how she could use her spirituality within her practice while remaining true to the profession's standards of "reasonable " care. This dialogue can occur without the counselor interpreting whether the message from God is logical, makes sense, or is "true".

Issues of spirituality are uncharted waters for career counselors. Career development specialists and researchers who are not trained sufficiently to ask about the convergence of spirituality and career development run the risk of ignoring a significant support system for their clients. The message that is to be learned from these AME church women is that spirituality and religious beliefs cannot be separated from career choice. Spirituality and career choice have connection, and that relationship will vary, depending upon one's own personal relationship with God or any other deity. Spirituality is an important element within the lives of these African American women and an essential component of their careers. Spirituality is worthy of continued examination, inquiry, and research in psychology and counseling professional preparation training programs. It must become an element of continuing education for career professionals. Graduate programs are encouraged to initiate internal discussions between faculty and students to identify effective ways of teaching about the spirituality /career development connection in

ways that are thoughtful, respectful of diversity, and encompass all religions, religious groups, and students with varying religious beliefs.

In summary, career development and spirituality are connected, according to these participants. As the numbers of clients and consumers who profess spirituality and spiritual beliefs increase, so will their demand that career professionals utilize spirituality within their practices. Graduate training programs are encouraged to review their training to ensure that this multicultural element of spirituality is valued, respected and nurtured to that future career professionals are prepared to address spirituality responsibly and ethically.

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Spirituality is relationship with God

Table 1 Sample statements

Sample Statement	# responses in this category
Reliance upon God	10
Relationship with God	3
God first	2
Close to God	6
Follow God's plan	5
Do what pleases God	3

Spirituality is significant in my life

Table 2 Sample statements

Sample Statement	# responses in this category
Big role in career choices	4
Spirituality supported me	2
Influenced specific career /life choices	7
Influences/shapes actions	5
Has limited career	6
Selected business to support church	1
Religion is life work	1

Listing of all scriptures and sample statements from

other spiritual messages*

Table 3

Scripture or statement	# responses in this category
Ephesians 4:1	1
Isaiah 49:1-7	1
Philippians 3:13	1
Philippians 4:3	1
Philippians 4:11	1
Philippians 4:6	1
Philippians 4:1	1
Psalm 6:	1
Psalm 23 entire chapter	2
Psalm 27	5
Psalm 37:4	2
Ten Commandments	1
I am blessed	2
Christ strengthens me	3
Do your best	2
Be with positive people	1
Have faith in God	2

*items were taken from question nine, *" Are there any Biblical scriptures or spiritual messages that are or have been valuable to you in making career choices? "*